

Myths and Facts about Sexual Orientation**

**[Please note that the following information is adapted (with a few revisions) with the kind permission of the Counseling Services office of the State University of New York at Buffalo. It is taken from the self-help section of their website: <http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/orient.shtml>].

Introduction

Does being "different" sound like a positive or a negative experience to you? For LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) persons, daily living can be a frustrating and painful experience in our society. Because they are different in their sexual orientation, LGB persons have been oppressed. They suffer social, religious, economic, political and legal discrimination. Much of this discrimination is based on the myths people believe about those who do not identify as heterosexual. For LGB persons to be treated equally in our society, we need to dispel these myths. What is most needed is the elimination of the irrational fear and hatred some people have for intimate, same-sex relationships. This irrational fear and hatred is called homophobia.

Myth #1 It's okay to call LGB persons names like "queer," "faggot," and "dyke" because they are "deviant."

Fact: A gay man or lesbian is someone whose primary sexual and affectional preference is for a member of his or her own sex. These preferences fall outside the statistical norm, but difference does not equal deviance. If it did, blue-eyed people and left-handed people - who are also in the statistical minority - would be considered deviant. Male homosexuals generally prefer to be called "gay," while female homosexuals generally prefer to be called "lesbian," although the term "gay" is often acceptable for both sexes. To be called "queer," "faggot," or "dyke" is derogatory and insulting. [Note that some people within the LGB community have adopted the word "queer" to describe their non-heterosexual orientation. For some in the community, this term is used as a political statement.]

Myth #2 LGB persons are mentally ill.

Fact: Homosexuality is considered normal in most of the world's cultures. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders and declared that homosexuality is as healthy as heterosexuality. Like anyone else, however, LGB persons can become maladjusted when they are treated with hostility.

Myth #3 LGB persons are not "normal."

Fact: Sexual behavior and orientation exist along a continuum that ranges from people who are exclusively attracted to members of the same sex, to people who are equally attracted to members of both sexes, to people who are exclusively attracted to members of the opposite sex. All are normal.

Myth #4 LGB persons are few in number and "hide out" in careers like theater, interior design and cosmetology.

Fact: A generally accepted statistic is that approximately one in 10 persons is gay or lesbian. Gay men, lesbian women, and bisexuals are found in all walks of life and in all professions. For example, consider the following professional associations: the National Lawyers Guild Gay Caucus, the Association of Gay Psychologists, the Gay Nurses Association, the Association of Gay Seminarians and Clergy, the Gay Airline Pilots Association, and the Gay Prize Fighters of America Association, to name but a few.

Myth #5 Gay men like to dress as women; gay men wish they were women and lesbians wish they were men.

Fact: Gay men and lesbians, for the most part, are comfortable with their identities as men and women and have no desire to change their sex. Some gay men dress up as women (e.g. for drag shows). Many men who enjoy dressing up in women's clothing (crossdressers) are heterosexual.

Myth #6 LGB persons are a menace to children.

Fact: The overwhelming majority of child molestation cases --90 to 95 percent-- involve heterosexual men and are committed against females under the age of 18.

Myth #7 LGB persons are promiscuous.

Fact: LGB persons are neither more nor less sexually promiscuous than heterosexuals. Like heterosexuals, many gay men and lesbians are involved in monogamous relationships, considering themselves partners and committed to each other for life. Some gay men and lesbians may also choose to remain celibate, and others may have multiple partners, just as some heterosexuals do.

Myth #8 Parents cause their children to become gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Fact: Reasons that a particular sexual orientation develops are unknown. Current research indicates that it is a very complex matter that involves both biological and environmental influences. Just as we cannot explain what makes some people heterosexual, we do not understand what makes other people gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Myth #9 If a gay man or lesbian could just meet the "right" member of the opposite sex, then he or she could fall in love and be "cured."

Fact: Many gay men and lesbians have dated members of the opposite sex but find it more fulfilling to date members of their own sex. Most LGB persons have no desire to change their sexual orientation. Those who do are usually reacting to negative societal attitudes toward homosexuality.

Myth #10 If a friend tells you he or she is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, then that friend is coming on to you.

Fact: Being gay involves more than a person's sexual activity. When friends "come out" (reveal their sexual orientation) to you, they are essentially inviting you to know them as whole people. If a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person chooses to come out to you, then that person has decided to share part of his or her identity with you. Such a disclosure means only that this friend trusts you, not that he or she would like to become sexually involved with you.

Myth #11 If you have friends who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, that must mean you are also gay.

Fact: Liking or loving someone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual does not make you gay any more than liking someone who is Catholic or Jewish makes you Catholic or Jewish.

Myth #12 AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a gay disease.

Fact: AIDS is caused by a virus. Viruses infect all kinds of people, regardless of their sexual orientation. Worldwide, the majority of HIV transmission occurs through heterosexual contact. AIDS is spread through the exchange of bodily fluids, such as blood, semen and breast milk. Some people have contracted AIDS from sharing intravenous needles. While AIDS has been contracted by a large number of gay men in the United States, it has also been contracted by heterosexual men and women as well as and children and even infants. Associating with gays does not mean you will get AIDS. For further information about AIDS, contact the National Gay Task Force Hotline (1-800-221-7044) or the National AIDS hotline (1-800-342-AIDS).

Some additional Myths and Facts...

Myth: Sexual orientation can be changed.

Fact: Research has shown that one's sexual orientation cannot be changed. While it is possible for persons (of any sexual orientation) to change their behaviors, e.g. by choosing to act or not act on their sexual feelings, one's underlying orientation remains constant.

Myth: Gay men and lesbian women are unfit to be parents.

Fact: Research has shown that the available data do not support negative stereotypes about same-sex parents. For example, children raised by gay or lesbian parents are not more likely to be gay or lesbian themselves and not more likely to experience problems in development or in relationships with friends/peers compared to those with heterosexual parents. There are many national organizations that support same-sex parenting, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Bar Association, and the American Psychological Association.

Myth: LGB and Ally political organizations are asking for "special rights."

Fact: LGB persons want the same rights as heterosexual Americans, including the right to live and work in an atmosphere free of discrimination, the right to be protected from violence and harassment, and the right to form life-long, committed partnerships.

Myth: Gay marriages or civil unions are a threat to heterosexual marriage.

Fact: There is no evidence to support the belief that same-sex unions would undermine heterosexual marriages.

Myth: LGB persons should not be schoolteachers, because they would bring their sexuality into the classroom.

Fact: Sexuality is neither more nor less a central or defining part of an LGB person's life than it is for a heterosexual person. Thus, sexuality would not influence an LGB person's teaching any more than it would for one who identifies as heterosexual.